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CAMPING AT THE POLE

by E. KRENKEL

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CAMPING AT THE POLE

By ERNST KRENKEL

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MEMBER OF THE SUPREME SOVIET
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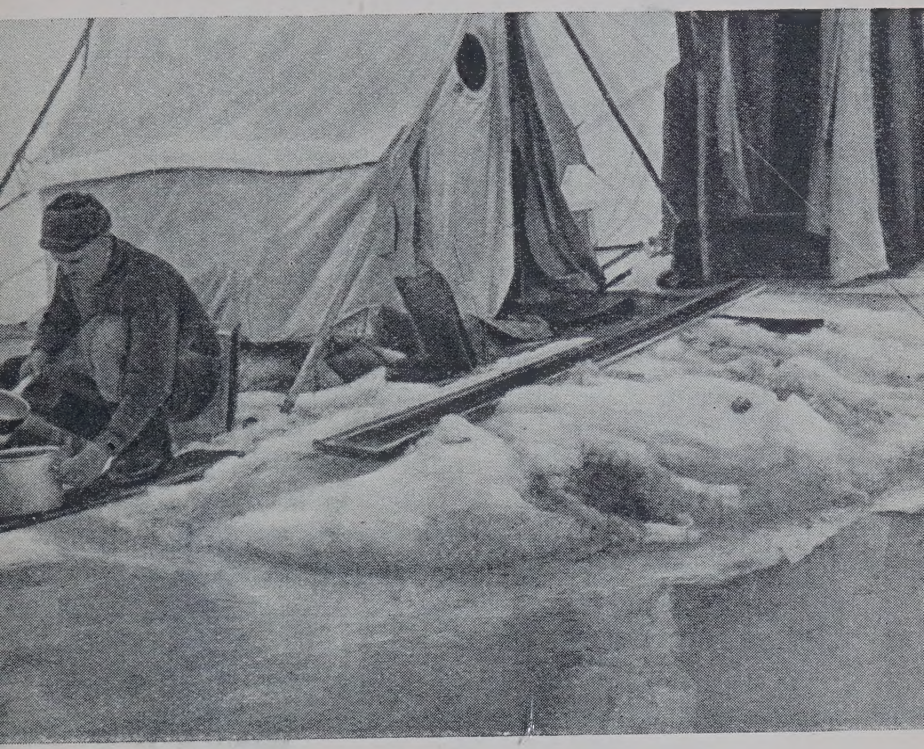

Ernst Krenkel Does a Bit of Housework

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THE preparations for our expedition to the North Pole took a whole year. The flyers who were to take us to the Pole and we, the four men who were to remain there, made our preparations separately.

A year was comparatively a short time in which to prepare for such a difficult expedition. Ivan Papanin was the soul of the undertaking. His exceptional qualities as an organizer and manager enabled him to make a brilliant success of the task that had been assigned to him.

We consulted the classics of Arctic geography and made a thorough study of all the available literature, but we could not find

answers to many of our questions and had to decide them for ourselves.

Not knowing beforehand how long we would drift with the ice, we took along enough supplies for a year and a half. We found it extremely difficult to keep within the strict ten ton limit allowed for equipment, fuel and food. Our first list came to well above ten tons. We kept cutting down and striking out and finally we managed to squeeze within the limit.

Besides being durable and reliable, every piece of equipment had to weigh as little as possible. That is why almost every item had to be made to order.

Our provisions were ordered from a special food institute. They cooked us enough dinner for eighteen months. Then it was steamed and dried and delivered to us in the form of powders and cubes. We dispensed with ordinary canned foods on account of their heavy water content and the weight of the cans.

The total weight of our radio apparatus with batteries, spare parts, masts,

Ivan Papanin, Chief of the "North Pole" Drifting Observatory, Taking Frozen Fish from the "Refrigerator"

the motor and wind dynamo was only half a ton.

In the course of fitting out our expedition all four of us had to supplement our regular professions with a working knowledge of the sciences involved in the numerous computations and observations which would be part of our day's work.

Our lives depended on astronomy and wireless telegraphy. Unless we could find our exact bearings and transmit them to the mainland, to find us in the Polar Basin would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Our chief astronomer was Fyodorov. His understudies were Papanin and Shirshov.

I was in charge of the wireless apparatus, but in case of need, both Fyodorov and Shirshov would have been able to make contact with the nearest stations without my assistance.

Before setting out on the expedition we went at length into the pros and cons of having a medical examination. Finally we decided against, being of the opinion that

even the most venturesome doctor would play on the safe side when he heard we were going to the Pole for a whole year and would find us guilty of half a dozen non-existent complaints, which would mean no North Pole for us.

Still we wanted to have some sort of medical assistance available on our expedition. To take a medical man with us for the special purpose was out of the question. In the first place he would represent an extra weight of eighty kilograms and in the second place, extra food supplies would have to be taken, to name only the chief disadvantages. We decided that Shirshov, as a biologist, was the most likely candidate for rapid initiation to the mysteries of medicine. We gave him six months, in which time he knew enough to render first aid. He warned us like the honest man he was: "Don't put too much faith in me, because I myself can't help thinking that my first aid will be your last."

It took us two months to reach the Pole from Moscow, although actually we did

Peter Shirshov at the Camera

not spend more than 26 hours in the air. We were held up at various stages waiting for suitable weather conditions. We had to proceed with the utmost caution with our four planes, each with four engines and a flying weight of 24 tons.

Landings had to be made on makeshift fields. If a single plane dropped out we would lose one quarter of our freight and might have to abandon our plan.

On Rudolf Island the weather detained us for a whole month.

At last the long awaited favorable weather came and the four of us flew to the Pole on one machine. It took us six hours.

After we had established ourselves at the Pole we informed the comrades remaining in the three other planes that it was possible to land at the Pole, but it would be necessary to wait a little as the weather was bad.

We set to work taking meteorological observations on the very first day. The people on Rudolf Island were very impatient for a weather report and I had to reason with them by wireless:

"There have been no weather bulletins from the Pole for the last 1937 years of grace. So be patient for another half-hour." After a few days the other planes arrived. Our equipment was now complete and with the help of the airmen we quickly fixed everything up and set to work.

Two weeks later the airmen flew back to the mainland.

On the day of their departure we held a meeting. We sang the *International* and hoisted the flag of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics together with a pennant bearing the portrait of Comrade Stalin.

A triple salute of pistol shots was fired and then came the moment of parting, and a last-minute presentation of wrenches, a Primus stove, a pack of cards, a spare frying pan and many other useful things which we needed no pressing to accept.

Then we hurriedly scribbled a few lines for home, with our writing pads on our knees. "Till we meet next year," were our farewell words, confidently spoken and as confidently

Eugene Fyodorov Building an Ice-Hut for his Observatory

returned, when we embraced and shook hands for the last time.

The sound of the last airplane died away in the low clouds, and we were alone.

We had a pretty stiff program of work before us. Every 30 miles we were to make a complete series of scientific observations.

The drift proved to be more rapid than we had expected, so that we found ourselves pushed for time from the very first day. It was like sitting astride a gigantic conveyor with the job running away from under our feet. To fall behind would make our data incomplete. Nor could we make up tomorrow for what we missed today. We had no end of work to do.

The taking of soundings and the hydrological observations were especially laborious. To say that the ocean is 4,290 meters deep at the Pole might sound just a cold figure to most people. But for us it meant six hours of back-breaking work, handling the windlass with its 180 pound load. We worked in pairs, changing turns every three or four hundred meters. The time seemed very

long when we were working at the windlass and very short when we were resting.

To leave Shirshov and Fyodorov free for their scientific work, all the "housework" was shared between Papanin and me.

Our ten ton cargo lay under the open sky. When summer came, all the snow melted and our three-meter ice lost a good half-meter, and was more than half-covered with pools and whole lakes of fresh water. We had to keep shifting our belongings from one place to another, out of the wet.

When winter set in with the polar night our cargo was buried in snow, which necessitated endless shovelling to keep it within reach when wanted. This took up a lot of energy and time.

Cooking took a great deal of time too.

To make our cubes into soup was only five minutes' work, provided we had water on the boil. But it took us two or three hours to boil a kettle of water—which would have been slow torture to people with nerves and delicate digestive systems which, fortunately, we were not.

On February 19, at 5.30 p.m. the "North Pole" Drifting Observatory closed down. Papanin and his fellow heroes were taken off their drifting ice-floe near the coast of Greenland by the ice-breakers *Taimyr* and *Murman*. Krenkel is seen transmitting the final report from Papanin's expedition to Comrade Stalin at 3.55 p.m.

We took very few books with us on account of the weight, but we had a set of chess. At first I was the only one in the camp who could distinguish a knight from a bishop, and thus I found myself the champion of the North Pole. But I taught my friends the rules of the game and inside two weeks found myself an ex-champion.

The radio apparatus was a blessing to us, apart from its being our means of communication. We listened in regularly to Moscow and so managed to keep up with current events.

We soon knew the names of all the women announcers and, over our evening mug of tea, would argue whether it was possible to tell by their voices if they were blondes or brunettes.

From the day we landed at the Pole to our last day on the ice, we received hundreds of messages from all parts of the Soviet Union, in which various organizations, schoolchildren and unknown well-wishers cheered us with expressions of good will and confidence.

We were in honor and duty bound to prove worthy of their confidence.

And when our ice field broke up we never had a moment's doubt that we would be saved.

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